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ABSTRACT

This paper offers advice to educators on how to tell their literacy stories through the medium of radio. It suggests educators examine their story idea closely and decide if radio is the best medium. It also suggests that educators should become familiar with the radio stations in the local market and get to know the personnel at the particular station--sending a story idea proposal to a particular person is the most effective way to get through. Additional advice offered in the paper includes: make the proposal easy to understand; do as much leg work as possible ahead of time; be patient and understanding if the reporter asks tough questions; and making follow-up calls. It concludes that with proper planning and skillful, precise distribution, educators can give their literacy story ideas the advantage they might need to catch the eye of a reporter. (RS)

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How To Tell Your Literacy Stories through Radio

by Michael Martini

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Paper presented at the Telling Our Stories Through Media Seminar at the Spring Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English, March 5, 1999

The first thing I recommend is examine your idea closely and decide which medium would best tell the story.

Keep in mind that radio is not a visual medium ... if your story idea is visual you might want to word your proposal differently when pursuing radio coverage... Similarly, some stories work exceptionally well on radio-possibly better than in the visual mediums. I recall doing a story at Wyoming High School on this method of teaching harp music to non-music students ... it turned out very well, I thought.

Radio audiences are different too ... where newspaper or television has, usually, one very good opportunity to make your story available, radio listeners are more hit-miss. Time spent listening is far less and greatly scattered. Most listeners are in their cars either heading to work in the morning or heading back home at night. Radio stations typically offer brief newscasts at the top and-or bottom of the hour and then repeat the story off and on throughout the day. Sometimes, radio stations offer structured news magazine programs, like a noon report, or a once-a-week magazine news round-up show, but this is more an exception than a rule.

One of the first things you can do is to become familiar with the radio stations in your market ... and that requires spending a few days going up and down the dial listening to what the stations are doing. In Cincinnati, for example, most of the major commercial stations are owned or operated by one company, Jacor, which has one news department to feed reports and newscasts on all of the stations. The positive is that it is a one stop shop, the negative is that the news department is so busy feeding all of the stations that they don't usually have enough time to do an in depth feature story. Know that on many commercial stations, there is a rule that news stories cannot exceed two or three sentences. If you have a story that can be told in two or three sentences, you should be fine, but most stories need more time. The other alternative is an independent news organization, which here in Cincinnati feeds the rest of the commercial stations-they too have similar problems with staff, timing and over-extension. The third option, and it is the one with which I am most

familiar is public radio where typically more in-depth stories are pursued, more time is allotted to those stories and where reporters are more willing to take chances and be creative.

One you've identified the stations in your market then start to identify personnel at the particular station. Get to know names. Remember that professional sounding radio news veterans are more likely to do a good job on your story, but they may be more selective about the stories they produce. Newcomers might not be as polished, but may be more willing to learn new things by trying atypical story ideas. Usually there is a news editor or assignment editor but the reporters themselves do have authority to pursue story ideas. Rarely does an editor reject a story idea suggested by a reporter.

The reason why knowing personnel is important is when you send out your media fact sheet or story idea proposal, I've found that addressing it to a particular person is the most effective way to get through. Especially young reporters who just love to get mail addressed to them. Sending a press packet or story idea to a "news director" to the "News department" or to "the assignment editor" places it in a very large pile of mail that is whisked through very quickly. At WVXU we receive dozens of letters and packages every day. Some days we open them promptly, some days they sit awhile. Usually, generically addressed mail gets a quick look and is filed one way or another if you know what I mean.

Make you proposal easy to understand. Explain why you think this is a good idea ... what problem are you hoping to address, what research backs up your proposal and why do you think a typical radio listener would care. Send it in an 8 1/2by 11 envelop, don't fold it all up. The full size letter size envelopes are usually treated with more attention than the folded up letter envelopes. Remember you are trying to "sell" a story idea-think like a salesperson or a newspaper writer-try and grab the reader's attention in the first few sentences. The reporter is a busy person and might not have time or energy to read through a seven page document before you actually talk about your proposal.

Do as much leg work as possible ahead of time. If there is a particular expert you'd like interviewed for the story, make it known that you will act as a liaison between the reporter and the expert. Make sure the expert knows you may be calling. If a particular situation requires scheduling or a location, have things at least in the early stages ahead of time. Some school systems require active participation of a publicity department or the school administration... have as much of that behind the scenes work done ahead of time. I recall going to a school once to do an interview. I first had trouble finding the front door, then I had trouble finding the office. Once I found the office the office staff had no idea about my arrival, they couldn't find the teacher I was to interview. It was unnecessarily confusing, poorly planned and left me, as a reporter, in less than a creative mood.

Remember, a reporter is a professional ... someone who has a set of ethical and professional rules to follow. That means the asking of some tough questions sometimes.

The reporter is not there to merely be a promotional tool or a commercial for your idea. He or she might request some proof that your idea works, might ask hard, difficult or probing questions and must, if she or he is any good, examine all sides of the story, even sides counter to what you may be proposing. Be patient and understand why. That is their job!

I know there is the idea of the follow-up call ... that is... a few days after you think the reporter received the packet, you call them directly. I've had good follow-up calls and bad ones. If you call and approach it like they've already accepted to do the story and ask to set up a meeting, it is, to me anyway, a major turn-off. If the follow-up is "hi, I'm so and so and I just wanted to make sure you got the packet. I've been listening to you on the station and I think you'd do the best job on it. Please call me if you have any questions" well, you've effectively buttered me up ... I would certainly give it the proper consideration.

After an interview or after a story airs, a thank you usually works wonders too. If you need a copy of a story, supply a cassette.

Literacy stories can turn out great on radio, but you are not the only one with a great idea. How you plan and prepare to present that idea to those who can help you is the key to the process. With proper planning and skillful, precise distribution you can give your idea the advantage it might need to catch the eye of the reporter.

Good luck and happy listening!